

It was a big mistake. I should not have done it. By birth, by instinct, by training, by habit, I am a man of action. Or I was. It is queer that an old man cannot remember that he is no longer young.

Commander John Hanson of the Special Patrol Service records another of his thrilling interplanetary assignments.

But it was a mistake for me to mention that I had recorded, for the archives of the Council, the history of a certain activity of the Special Patrol—a bit of secret history which may not be mentioned here. Now they insist—by "they" I refer to the Chiefs of the Special Patrol Service—that I write of other achievements of the Service, other adventures worthy of note.

Perhaps that is the penalty of becoming old. From commander of the *Budi*, one of the greatest of the Special Patrol ships, to the duties of recording ancient history, for younger men to read and dream about. That is a shrewd blow to one's pride.

But if I can, in some small way, add luster to the record of my service, it will be a fitting task for a man grown old and gray in that service; work for hands too weak and palsied for sterner duties.

But I shall tell my stories in my own way; after all, they are my stories. And I shall tell the stories that appeal to me most. The universe has had enough and too much of dry history; these shall be adventurous tales to make the blood of a young man who reads them run a trifle faster—and perhaps the blood of the old man who writes them.

This, the first, shall be the story of the star L-472. You know it to-day as Ibit, port-o'-call for interplanetary ships, and source of ocrate for the universe, but to me it will always be L-472, the world of terrible tentacles.

My story begins nearly a hundred years ago—reckoned in terms of Earth time, which is proper, since I am a native of Earth—when I was a young man. I was sub-commander, at the time, of the *Kalid*, one of the early ships of the Special Patrol.

We had been called to Zenia on special orders, and Commander Jamison, after an absence of some two hours, returned to the *Kalid* with his face shining, one of his rare smiles telling me in advance that he had news—and good news.

He hurried me up to the deserted navigating room and waved me to a seat.

"Hanson," he said. "I'm glad to be the first to congratulate you. You are now Commander John Hanson, of the Special Patrol Ship *Kalid*!"

"Sir." I gasped, "do you mean—"

His smile broadened. From the breast pocket of the trim blue and silver uniform of our Service he drew a long, crackling paper.

"Your commission," he said. "I'm taking over the *Borelis*."

It was my turn to extend congratulations then; the *Borelis* was the newest and greatest ship of the

Service. We shook hands, that ancient gesture of good-fellowship on Earth. But, as our hands unclasped, Jamison's face grew suddenly grave.

"I have more than this news for you, however," he said slowly. "You are to have a chance to earn your comet hardly."

I smiled broadly at the mention of the comet, the silver insignia, worn over the heart, that would mark my future rank as commander, replacing the four-rayed star of a sub-commander which I wore now on my tunic.

"Tell me more, sir," I said confidently.

"You have heard of the Special Patrol Ship *Filanus*?" asked my late commander gravely.

"Reported lost in space," I replied promptly.

"And the *Dorlos*?"

"Why—yes; she was at Base here at our last call," I said, searching his face anxiously. "Peter Wilson was Second Officer on her—one of my best friends. Why do you ask about her, sir?"

"The *Dorlos* is missing also," said Commander Jamison solemnly. "Both of these ships were sent upon a particular mission. Neither of them has returned. It is concluded that some common fate has overtaken them. The *Kalid*, under your command, is commissioned to investigate these disappearances.

"You are not charged with the mission of these other ships; your orders are to investigate their disappearance. The course, together with the official patrol orders, I shall hand you presently, but with them go verbal orders.

"You are to lay and keep the course designated, which will take you well out of the beaten path to a small world which has not been explored, but which has been circumnavigated a number of times by various ships remaining just outside the atmospheric envelope, and found to be without evidence of

intelligent habitation. In other words, without cities, roads, canals, or other evidence of human handiwork or civilization.

I believe your instructions give you some of this information, but not all of it. This world, unnamed because of its uninhabited condition, is charted only as L-472. Your larger charts will show it, I am sure. The atmosphere is reported to be breatheable by inhabitants of Earth and other beings having the same general requirements. Vegetation is reported as dense, covering the five continents of the world to the edges of the northern and southern polar caps, which are small. Topographically, the country is rugged in the extreme, with many peaks, apparently volcanic, but now inactive or extinct, on all of its five large continents."

"And am I to land there, sir?" I asked eagerly.

"Your orders are very specific upon that point," said Commander Jamison. "You are not to land until you have carefully and thoroughly reconnoitered from above, at low altitude. You will exercise every possible

precaution. Your specific purpose is simply this: to determine, if possible, the fate of the other two ships, and report your findings at once. The Chiefs of the Service will then consider the matter, and take whatever action may seem advisable to them."

Jamison rose to his feet and thrust out his hand in Earth's fine old salute of farewell.

"I must be going, Hanson," he said. "I wish this patrol were mine instead of yours. You are a young man for such a responsibility."

"But," I replied, with the glowing confidence of youth, "I have the advantage of having served under Commander Jamison!"

He smiled as we shook again, and shook his head.

"Discretion can be learned only by experience," he said. "But I wish you success, Hanson; on this undertaking, and on many others. Supplies are on their way now; the crew will return from leave within the hour. A young Zenian, name of Dival, I believe, is detailed to accompany you as scientific observer—

purely unofficial capacity, of course. He has been ordered to report to you at once. You are to depart as soon as feasible: you know what that means. I believe that's all—Oh, yes! I had almost forgotten.

"Here, in this envelope, are your orders and your course, as well as all available data on L-472. In this little casket is—your comet, Hanson. I know you will wear it with honor!"

"Thank you, sir!" I said, a bit huskily. I saluted, and Commander Jamison acknowledged the gesture with stiff precision. Commander Jamison always had the reputation of being something of a martinet.

When he had left, I picked up the thin blue envelope he had left. Across the face of the envelope, in the—to my mind—jagged and unbeautiful Universal script, was my name, followed by the proud title:

*"Commander, Special Patrol Ship Kalid."* My first orders!

There was a small oval box, of blue leather, with the silver crest of the Service in bas-relief on the lid. I



opened the case, and gazed with shining eyes at the gleaming, silver comet that nestled there.

Then, slowly, I unfastened the four-rayed star on my left breast, and placed in its stead the insignia of my commandership.

Worn smooth and shiny now, it is still my most precious possession.

Kincaide, my second officer, turned and smiled as I entered the navigating room.

"L-472 now registers maximum attraction, sir," he reported. "Dead ahead, and coming up nicely. My last figures, completed about five minutes ago, indicate that we should reach the gaseous envelope in about ten hours." Kincaide was a native of Earth, and we commonly used Earth time-measurements in our conversation. As is still the case, ships of the Special Patrol Service were commanded without exception by natives of Earth, and the entire officer personnel hailed largely from the same planet, although I have

had several Zenian officers of rare ability and courage.

I nodded and thanked him for the report. Maximum attraction, eh? That, considering the small size of our objective, meant we were much closer to L-472 than to any other regular body.

Mechanically, I studied the various dials about the room. The attraction meter, as Kincaide had said, registered several degrees of attraction, and the red slide on the rim of the dial was squarely at the top, showing that the attraction was coming from the world at which our nose was pointed. The surface-temperature gauge was at normal. Internal pressure, normal. Internal moisture-content, a little high. Kincaide, watching me, spoke up:

"I have already given orders to dry out, sir," he said.

"Very good, Mr. Kincaide. It's a long trip, and I want the crew in good condition." I studied the two charts, one showing our surroundings laterally, the other vertically, all bodies about us represented as glowing

spots of green light, of varying sizes; the ship itself as a tiny scarlet spark. Everything shipshape: perhaps, a degree or two of elevation when we were a little closer—

"May I come in sir?" broke in a gentle, high-pitched voice.

"Certainly, Mr. Dival," I replied, answering in the Universal language in which the request had been made. "You are always very welcome." Dival was a typical Zenian of the finest type: slim, very dark, and with the amazingly intelligent eyes of his kind. His voice was very soft and gentle, and like the voice of all his people, clear and high-pitched.

"Thank you," he said. "I guess I'm over-eager, but there's something about this mission of ours that worries me. I seem to feel—" He broke off abruptly and began pacing back and forth across the room.

I studied him, frowning. The Zenians have a strange way of being right about such things; their high-strung, sensitive natures seem capable of responding

to those delicate, vagrant forces which even now are only incompletely understood and classified.

"You're not used to work of this sort," I replied, as bluffly and heartily as possible. "There's nothing to worry about."

"The commanders of the two ships that disappeared probably felt the same way, sir," said Dival. "I should have thought the Chiefs of the Special Patrol Service would have sent several ships on a mission such as this."

"Easy to say," I laughed bitterly. "If the Council would pass the appropriations we need, we might have ships enough so that we could send a fleet of ships when we wished. Instead of that, the Council, in its infinite wisdom, builds greater laboratories and schools of higher learning—and lets the Patrol get along as best it can."

"It was from the laboratories and the schools of higher learning that all these things sprang," replied

Dival quietly, glancing around at the array of instruments which made navigation in space possible.

"True," I admitted rather shortly. "We must work together. And as for what we shall find upon the little world ahead, we shall be there in nine or ten hours. You may wish to make some preparations."

"Nine or ten hours? That's Earth time, isn't it? Let's see: about two and a half enaros."

"Correct," I smiled. The Universal method of reckoning time had never appealed to me. For those of my readers who may only be familiar with Earth time measurements, an enar is about eighteen Earth days, an enaren a little less than two Earth days, and an enaro nearly four and a half hours. The Universal system has the advantage, I admit, of a decimal division; but I have found it clumsy always. I may be stubborn and old-fashioned, but a clock face with only ten numerals and one hand still strikes me as being unbeautiful and inefficient.

"Two and a half enaros," repeated Dival thoughtfully. "I believe I shall see if I can get a little sleep now; I should not have brought my books with me, I'm afraid. I read when I should sleep. Will you call me should there be any developments of interest?"

I assured him that he would be called as he requested, and he left.

"Decent sort of a chap, sir," observed Kincaide, glancing at the door through which Dival had just departed.

"A student," I nodded, with the contempt of violent youth for the man of gentler pursuits than mine, and turned my attentions to some calculations for entry in the log.

Busied with the intricate details of my task, time passed rapidly. The watch changed, and I joined my officers in the tiny, arched dining salon. It was during the meal that I noticed for the first time a sort of tenseness; every member of the mess was unusually quiet. And though I would not, have admitted it then,

I was not without a good deal of nervous restraint myself.

"Gentlemen," I remarked when the meal was finished, "I believe you understand our present mission. Primarily, our purpose is to ascertain, if possible, the fate of two ships that were sent here and have not returned. We are now close enough for reasonable observation by means of the television disc, I believe, and I shall take over its operation myself.

"There is no gainsaying the fact that whatever fate overtook the two other Patrol ships, may lay in wait for us. My orders are to observe every possible precaution, and to return with a report. I am going to ask that each of you proceed immediately to his post, and make ready, in so far as possible, for any eventuality. Warn the watch which has just gone off to be ready for instant duty. The disintegrator ray generators should be started and be available for instant emergency use, maximum power. Have the bombing crews stand by for orders."

"What do you anticipate, sir?" asked Correy, my new sub-commander. The other officers waited tensely for my reply.

"I don't know, Mr. Correy," I admitted reluctantly. "We have no information upon which to base an assumption. We do know that two ships have been sent here, and neither of them have returned. Something prevented that return. We must endeavor to prevent that same fate from overtaking the *Kalid*—and ourselves."

Hurrying back to the navigating room, I posted myself beside the cumbersome, old-fashioned television instrument. L-472 was near enough now to occupy the entire field, with the range hand at maximum. One whole continent and parts of two others were visible. Not many details could be made out.

I waited grimly while an hour, two hours, went by. My field narrowed down to one continent, to a part of one continent. I glanced up at the surface temperature gauge and noted that the hand was registering a few



degrees above normal. Correy, who had relieved Kincaide as navigating officer, followed my gaze.

"Shall we reduce speed, sir?" he asked crisply.

"To twice atmospheric speed," I nodded. "When we enter the envelope proper, reduce to normal atmospheric speed. Alter your course upon entering the atmosphere proper, and work back and forth along the emerging twilight zone, from the north polar cap to the southern cap, and so on."

"Yes, sir!" he replied, and repeated the orders to the control room forward.

I pressed the attention signal to Dival's cubicle, and informed him that we were entering the outer atmospheric fringe.

"Thank you, sir!" he said eagerly. "I shall be with you immediately."

In rapid succession I called various officers and gave terse orders. Double crews on duty in the generator

compartment, the ray projectors, the atomic bomb magazines, and release tubes. Observers at all observation posts, operators at the two smaller television instruments to comb the terrain and report instantly any object of interest. With the three of us searching, it seemed incredible that anything could escape us. At atmospheric altitudes even the two smaller television instruments would be able to pick out a body the size of one of the missing ships.

Dival entered the room as I finished giving my orders.

"A strange world, Dival," I commented, glancing towards the television instrument. "Covered with trees, even the mountains, and what I presume to be volcanic peaks. They crowd right down to the edge of the water."

He adjusted the focusing lever slightly, his face lighting up with the interest of a scientist gazing at a strange specimen, whether it be a microbe or a new world.

"Strange ... strange ..." he muttered. "A universal vegetation ... no variation of type from equator to polar cap, apparently. And the water—did you notice its color, sir?"

"Purple," I nodded. "It varies on the different worlds, you know. I've seen pink, red, white and black seas, as well as the green and blue of Earth."

"And no small islands," he went on, as though he had not ever heard me. "Not in the visible portion, at any rate."

I was about to reply, when I felt the peculiar surge of the *Kalid* as she reduced speed. I glanced at the indicator, watching the hand drop slowly to atmospheric speed.

"Keep a close watch, Dival," I ordered. "We shall change our course now, to comb the country for traces of two ships we are seeking. If you see the least suspicious sign, let me know immediately."

He nodded, and for a time there was only a tense silence in the room, broken at intervals by Correy as he spoke briefly into his microphone, giving orders to the operating room.

Perhaps an hour went by. I am not sure. It seemed like a longer time than that. Then Dival called out in sudden excitement, his high, thin voice stabbing the silence:

"Here, sir! Look! A little clearing—artificial, I judge—and the ships! Both of them!"

"Stop the ship, Mr. Correy!" I snapped as I hurried to the instrument. "Dival, take those reports." I gestured towards the two attention signals that were glowing and softly humming and thrust my head into the shelter of the television instrument's big hood.

Dival had made no mistake. Directly beneath me, as I looked, was a clearing, a perfect square with rounded corners, obviously blasted out of the solid forest by the delicate manipulation of sharply focused disintegrator rays. And upon the naked, pitted surface

thus exposed, side by side in orderly array, were the missing ships!

I studied the strange scene with a heart that thumped excitedly against my ribs.

What should I do? Return and report? Descend and investigate? There was no sign of life around the ships, and no evidence of damage. If I brought the *Kalid* down, would she make a third to remain there, to be marked "lost in space" on the records of the Service?

Reluctantly, I drew my head from beneath the shielding hood.

"What were the two reports, Dival?" I asked, and my voice was thick. "The other two television observers?"

"Yes, sir. They report that they cannot positively identify the ships with their instruments, but feel certain that they are the two we seek."

"Very good. Tell them, please, to remain on watch, searching space in every direction, and to report instantly anything suspicious. Mr. Correy, we will descend until this small clearing becomes visible, through the ports, to the unaided eye. I will give you the corrections to bring us directly over the clearing." And I read the finder scales of the television instrument to him.

He rattled off the figures, calculated an instant, and gave his orders to the control room, while I kept the television instrument bearing upon the odd clearing and the two motionless, deserted ships.

As we settled, I could make out the insignia of the ships, could see the pitted, stained earth of the clearing, brown with the dust of disintegration. I could see the surrounding trees very distinctly now: they seemed very similar to our weeping willows, on Earth, which, I perhaps should explain, since it is impossible for the average individual to have a comprehensive knowledge of the flora and fauna of the entire known Universe, is a tree of considerable size, having long, hanging branches arching from its

crown and reaching nearly to the ground. These leaves, like typical willow leaves, were long and slender, of rusty green color. The trunks and branches seemed to be black or dark brown: and the trees grew so thickly that nowhere between their branches was the ground visible.

"Five thousand feet, sir," said Correy. "Directly above the clearing. Shall we descend further?"

"A thousand feet at a time, Mr. Correy," I replied, after a moment's hesitation. "My orders are to exercise the utmost caution. Mr. Dival, please make a complete analysis of the atmosphere. I believe you are familiar with the traps provided for the purpose?"

"Yes. You propose to land, sir?"

"I propose to determine the fate of those two ships and the men who brought them here," I said with sudden determination. Dival made no reply, but as he turned to obey orders, I saw that his presentiment of trouble had not left him.

"Four thousand feet, sir," said Correy.

I nodded, studying the scene below us. The great hooded instrument brought it within, apparently, fifty feet of my eyes, but the great detail revealed nothing of interest.

The two ships lay motionless, huddled close together. The great circular door of each was open, as though opened that same day—or a century before.

"Three thousand feet, sir," said Correy.

"Proceed at the same speed," I replied. Whatever fate had overtaken the men of the other ships had caused them to disappear entirely—and without sign of a struggle. But what conceivable fate could that be?

"Two thousand feet, sir," said Correy.

"Good," I said grimly. "Continue with the descent, Mr. Correy."



Dival hurried into the room as I spoke. His face was still clouded with foreboding.

"I have tested the atmosphere, sir," he reported. "It is suitable for breathing by either men of Earth or Zenia. No trace of noxious gases of any kind. It is probably rather rarified, such as one might find on Earth or Zenia at high altitudes."

"One thousand feet, sir," said Correy.

I hesitated an instant. Undoubtedly the atmosphere had been tested by the other ships before they landed. In the case of the second ship, at any rate, those in command must have been on the alert against danger. And yet both of those ships lay there motionless, vacant, deserted.

I could feel the eyes of the men on me. My decision must be delayed no further.

"We will land, Mr. Correy," I said grimly. "Near the two ships, please."

"Very well, sir," nodded Correy, and spoke briefly into the microphone.

"I might warn you, sir," said Dival quietly, "to govern your activities, once outside: free from the gravity pads of the ship, on a body of such small size, an ordinary step will probably cause a leap of considerable distance."

"Thank you, Mr. Dival. That is a consideration I had overlooked. I shall warn the men. We must—"

At that instant I felt the slight jar of landing. I glanced up; met Correy's grave glance squarely.

"Grounded, sir," he said quietly.

"Very good, Mr. Correy. Keep the ship ready for instant action, please, and call the landing crew to the forward exit. You will accompany us, Mr. Dival?"

"Certainly, sir!"

"Good. You understand your orders, Mr. Correy?"

"Yes, sir!"

I returned his salute, and led the way out of the room, Dival close on my heels.

The landing crew was composed of all men not at regular stations; nearly half of the *Kalid's* entire crew. They were equipped with the small atomic power pistols as side-arms, and there were two three-men disintegrator ray squads. We all wore menores, which were unnecessary in the ship, but decidedly useful outside. I might add that the minore of those days was not the delicate, beautiful thing that it is to-day: it was comparatively crude, and clumsy band of metal, in which were imbedded the vital units and the tiny atomic energy generator, and was worn upon the head like a crown. But for all its clumsiness, it conveyed and received thought, and, after all, that was all we demanded of it.

I caught a confused jumble of questioning thoughts as I came up, and took command of the situation promptly. It will be understood, of course, that in those days men had not learned to blank their minds

against the menore, as they do to-day. It took generations of training to perfect that ability.

"Open the exit," I ordered Kincaide, who was standing by the switch, key in the lock.

"Yes, sir," he thought promptly, and unlocking the switch, released the lever.

The great circular door revolved swiftly, backing slowly on its fine threads, gripped by the massive gimbals which, as at last the ponderous plug of metal freed itself from its threads, swung the circular door aside, like the door of a vault.

Fresh clean air swept in, and we breathed, it gratefully. Science can revitalize air, take out impurities and replace used-up constituents, but if cannot give it the freshness of pure natural air. Even the science of to-day.

"Mr. Kincaide, you will stand by with five men. Under no circumstances are you to leave your post until ordered to do so. No rescue parties, under any

circumstances, are to be sent out unless you have those orders directly from me. Should any untoward thing happen to this party, you will instantly reseal this exit, reporting at the same time to Mr. Correy, who has his orders. You will not attempt to rescue us, but will return to the Base and report in full, with Mr. Correy in command. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly," came back his response instantly; but I could sense the rebellion in his mind. Kincaid and I were old friends, as well as fellow officers.

I smiled at him reassuringly, and directed my orders to the waiting men.

"You are aware of the fate of the two ships of the Patrol that have already landed here," I thought slowly, to be sure they understood perfectly. "What fate overtook them, I do not know. That is what we are here to determine."

"It is obvious that this is a dangerous mission. I'm ordering none of you to go. Any man who wishes to be relieved from landing duty may remain inside the

ship, and may feel it no reproach. Those who do go should be constantly on the alert, and keep in formation; the usual column of twos. Be very careful, when stepping out of the ship, to adjust your stride to the lessened gravity of this small world. Watch this point!" I turned to Dival, motioned him to fall in at my side. Without a backward glance, we marched out of the ship, treading very carefully to keep from leaping into the air with each step.

Twenty feet away, I glanced back. There were fourteen men behind me—not a man of the landing crew had remained in the ship!

"I am proud of you men!" I thought heartily: and no emanation from any man was ever more sincere.

Cautiously, eyes roving ceaselessly, we made our way towards the two silent ships. It seemed a quiet, peaceful world: an unlikely place for tragedy. The air was fresh and clean, although, as Dival had predicted, rarefied like the air at an altitude. The willow-like trees that hemmed us in rustled gently, their long,

frond-like branches with their rusty green leaves swaying.

"Do you notice, sir," came a gentle thought from Dival, an emanation that could hardly have been perceptible to the men behind us, "that there is no wind—and yet the trees, yonder, are swaying and rustling?"

I glanced around, startled. I had not noticed the absence of a breeze.

I tried to make my response reassuring:

"There is probably a breeze higher up, that doesn't dip down into this little clearing," I ventured. "At any rate, it is not important. These ships are what interest me. What will we find there?"

"We shall soon know," replied Dival. "Here is the *Dorlos*; the second of the two, was it not?"

"Yes." I came to a halt beside the gaping door. There was no sound within, no evidence of life there, no sign

that men had ever crossed that threshold, save that the whole fabric was the work of man's hands.

"Mr. Dival and I will investigate the ship, with two of you men," I directed. "The rest of the detail will remain on guard, and give the alarm at the least sign of any danger. You first two men, follow us." The indicated men nodded and stepped forward. Their "Yes, sirs" came surging through my menore like a single thought. Cautiously, Dival at my side, the two men at our backs, we stepped over the high threshold into the interior of the *Dorlos*.

The *ethon* tubes overhead made everything as light as day, and since the *Dorlos* was a sister ship of my own *Kalid*, I had not the slightest difficulty in finding my way about.

There was no sign of a disturbance anywhere. Everything was in perfect order. From the evidence, it would seem that the officers and men of the *Dorlos* had deserted the ship of their own accord, and—failed to return.



"Nothing of value here," I commented to Dival. "We may as well—"

There was a sudden commotion from outside the ship. Startled shouts rang through the hollow hull, and a confused medley of excited thoughts came pouring in.

With one accord the four of us dashed to the exit, Dival and I in the lead. At the door we paused, following the stricken gaze of the men grouped in a rigid knot just outside.

Some, forty feet away was the edge of the forest that hemmed us in. A forest that now was lashing and writhing as though in the grip of some terrible hurricane, trunks bending and whipping, long branches writhing, curling, lashing out—

"Two of the men, sir!" shouted a non-commissioned officer of the landing crew, as we appeared in the doorway. In his excitement he forgot his menore, and resorted to the infinitely slower but more natural speech. "Some sort of insect came buzzing down—like an Earth bee, but larger. One of the men slapped it,

and jumped aside, forgetting the low gravity here. He shot into the air, and another of the men made a grab for him. They both went sailing, and the trees—*look!*"

But I had already spotted the two men. The trees had them in their grip, long tentacles curled around them, a dozen of the great willow-like growths apparently fighting for possession of the prizes. And all around, far out of reach, the trees of the forest were swaying restlessly, their long, pendulous branches, like tentacles, lashing out hungrily.

"The rays, sir!" snapped the thought from Dival, like a flash of lightning. "Concentrate the beams—strike at the trunks—"

"Right!" My orders emanated on the heels of the thought more quickly than one word could have been uttered. The six men who operated the disintegrator rays were stung out of their startled immobility, and the soft hum of the atomic power generators deepened.

"Strike at the trunks of the trees! Beams narrowed to minimum! Action at will!"

The invisible rays swept long gashes into the forest as the trainers squatted behind their sights, directing the long, gleaming tubes. Branches crashed to the ground, suddenly motionless. Thick brown dust dropped heavily. A trunk, shortened by six inches or so, dropped into its stub and fell with a prolonged sound of rending wood. The trees against which it had fallen tugged angrily at their trapped tentacles.

One of the men rolled free, staggered to his feet, and came lurching towards us. Trunk after trunk dropped onto its severed stub and fell among the lashing branches of its fellows. The other man was caught for a moment in a mass of dead and motionless wood, but a cunningly directed ray dissolved the entangling branches around him and he lay there, free but unable to arise.

The rays played on ruthlessly. The brown, heavy powder was falling like greasy soot. Trunk after trunk crashed to the ground, slashed into fragments.

"Cease action!" I ordered, and instantly the eager whine of the generators softened to a barely discernible hum. Two of the men, under orders, raced out to the injured man: the rest of us clustered around the first of the two to be freed from the terrible tentacles of the trees.

His menore was gone, his tight-fitting uniform was in shreds, and blotched with blood. There was a huge crimson welt across his face, and blood dripped slowly from the tips of his fingers.

"*God!*" he muttered unsteadily as kindly arms lifted him with eager tenderness. "They're alive! Like snakes. They—they're *hungry!*"

"Take him to the ship," I ordered. "He is to receive treatment immediately," I turned to the detail that was bringing in the other victim. The man was unconscious, and moaning, but suffering more from shock than anything else. A few minutes under the helio emanations and he would be fit for light duty.

As the men hurried him to the ship, I turned to Dival. He was standing beside me, rigid, his face very pale, his eyes fixed on space.

"What do you make of it, Mr. Dival?" I questioned him.

"Of the trees?" He seemed startled, as though I had aroused him from deepest thought. "They are not difficult to comprehend, sir. There are numerous growths that are primarily carnivorous. We have the fintel vine on Zenia, which coils instantly when touched, and thus traps many small animals which it wraps about with its folds and digests through sucker-like growths.

"On your own Earth there are, we learn, hundreds of varieties of insectivorous plants: the Venus fly-trap, known otherwise as the *Dionaea Muscipula*, which has a leaf hinged in the median line, with teeth-like bristles. The two portions of the leaf snap together with considerable force when an insect alights upon the surface, and the soft portions of the catch are digested by the plant before the leaf opens again. The pitcher plant is another native of Earth, and several

varieties of it are found on Zenia and at least two other planets. It traps its game without movement, but is nevertheless insectivorous. You have another species on Earth that is, or was, very common: the *Mimosa Pudica*. Perhaps you know it as the sensitive plant. It does not trap insects, but it has a very distinct power of movement, and is extremely irritable.

"It is not at all difficult to understand a carnivorous tree, capable of violent and powerful motion. This is undoubtedly what we have here—a decidedly interesting phenomena, but not difficult of comprehension."

It seems like a long explanation, as I record it here, but emanated as it was, it took but an instant to complete it. Mr. Dival went on without a pause:

"I believe, however, that I have discovered something far more important. How is your menore adjusted, sir?"

"At minimum."

"Turn it to maximum, sir."

I glanced at him curiously, but obeyed. New streams of thought poured in upon me. Kincaide ... the guard at the exit ... *and something else*.

I blanked out Kincaide and the men, feeling Dival's eyes searching my face. There was something else, something—

I focused on the dim, vague emanations that came to me from the circlet of my minore, and gradually, like an object seen through heavy mist, I perceived the message:

"Wait! Wait! We are coming! Through the ground. The trees ... disintegrate them ... all of them ... all you can reach. But not the ground ... not the ground...."

"Peter!" I shouted, turning to Dival. "That's Peter Wilson, second officer of the *Dorlos*!"

Dival nodded, his dark face alight.

"Let us see if we can answer him," he suggested, and we concentrated all our energy on a single thought: "We understand. We understand."

The answer came back instantly:

"Good! Thank God! Sweep them down, Hanson: every tree of them. Kill them ... kill them ... kill them!" The emanation fairly shook with hate. "We are coming ... to the clearing ... wait—and while you wait, use your rays upon these accursed hungry trees!"

Grimly and silently we hurried back to the ship. Dival, the savant, snatching up specimens of earth and rock here and there as we went.

The disintegrator rays of the portable projectors were no more than toys compared with the mighty beams the *Kalid* was capable of projecting, with her great generators to supply power. Even with the beams narrowed to the minimum, they cut a swath a yard or more in diameter, and their range was tremendous; although working rather less rapidly as the distance



and power decreased, they were effective over a range of many miles.

Before their blasting beams the forest shriveled and sank into tumbled chaos. A haze of brownish dust hung low over the scene, and I watched with a sort of awe. It was the first time I had ever seen the rays at work on such wholesale destruction.

A startling thing became evident soon after we began our work. This world that we had thought to be void of animal life, proved to be teeming with it. From out of the tangle of broken and harmless branches, thousands of animals appeared. The majority of them were quite large, perhaps the size of full-grown hogs, which Earth animal they seemed to resemble, save that they were a dirty yellow color, and had strong, heavily-clawed feet. These were the largest of the animals, but there were myriads of smaller ones, all of them pale or neutral in color, and apparently unused to such strong light, for they ran blindly, wildly seeking shelter from the universal confusion.

Still the destructive beams kept about their work, until the scene changed utterly. Instead of resting in a clearing, the *Kalid* was in the midst of a tangle of fallen, wilting branches that stretched like a great, still sea, as far as the eye could see.

"Cease action!" I ordered suddenly. I had seen, or thought I had seen, a human figure moving in the tangle, not far from the edge of the clearing. Correy relayed the order, and instantly the rays were cut off. My menore, free from the interference of the great atomic generators of the *Kalid*, emanated the moment the generators ceased functioning.

"Enough. Hanson! Cut the rays; we're coming."

"We have ceased action; come on!"

I hurried to the still open exit. Kincaide and his guards were staring at what had been the forest; they were so intent that they did not notice I had joined them—and no wonder!

A file of men were scrambling over the debris; gaunt men with dishevelled hair, practically naked, covered with dirt and the greasy brown dust of the disintegrator ray. In the lead, hardly recognizable, his menore awry upon his tangled locks, was Peter Wilson.

"Wilson!" I shouted; and in a single great leap I was at his side, shaking his hand, one arm about his scarred shoulders, laughing and talking excitedly, all in the same breath. "Wilson, tell me—in God's name—what has happened?"

He looked up at me with shining, happy eyes, deep in black sockets of hunger and suffering.

"The part that counts," he said hoarsely, "is that you're here, and we're here with you. My men need rest and food—not too much food, at first, for we're starving. I'll give you the story—or as much of it as I know—while we eat."

I sent my orders ahead; for every man of that pitiful crew of survivors, there were two eager men of the

*Kalid's* crew to minister to him. In the little dining salon of the officers' mess, Wilson gave us the story, while he ate slowly and carefully, keeping his ravenous hunger in check.

"It's a weird sort of story," he said. "I'll cut it as short as I can. I'm too weary for details.

"The *Dorlos*, as I suppose you know, was ordered to L-472 to determine the fate of the *Filanus*, which had been sent here to determine the feasibility of establishing a supply base here for a new interplanetary ship line.

"It took us nearly three days, Earth time, to locate this clearing and the *Filanus*, and we grounded the *Dorlos* immediately. Our commander—you probably remember him, Hanson: David McClellan? Big, red-faced chap?"

I nodded, and Wilson continued.

"Commander McClellan was a choleric person, as courageous a man as ever wore the blue and silver of

the Service, and very thoughtful of his men. We had had a bad trip; two swarms of meteorites that had worn our nerves thin, and a faulty part in the air-purifying apparatus had nearly done us in. While the exit was being unsealed, he gave the interior crew permission to go off duty, to get some fresh air, with orders, however, to remain close to the ship, under my command. Then, with the usual landing crew, he started for the *Filanus*.

"He had forgotten, under the stress of the moment, that the force of gravity would be very small on a body no larger than this. The result was that as soon as they hurried out of the ship, away from the influence of our own gravity pads, they hurtled into the air in all directions."

Wilson paused. Several seconds passed before he could go on.

"Well, the trees—I suppose you know something about them—reached out and swept up three of them. McClellan and the rest of the landing crew rushed to

their rescue. They were caught up. *God!* I can see them ... hear them ... even now!

"I couldn't stand there and see that happen to them. With the rest of the crew behind me, we rushed out, armed only with our atomic pistols. We did not dare use the rays; there were a dozen men caught up everywhere in those hellish tentacles.

"I don't know what I thought we could do. I knew only that I must do something. Our leaps carried us over the tops of the trees that were fighting for the ... the bodies of McClellan and the rest of the landing crew. I saw then, when it was too late, that there was nothing we could do. The trees ... had done their work. They ... they were *feeding*....

"Perhaps that is why we escaped. We came down in a tangle of whipping branches. Several of my men were snatched up. The rest of us saw how helpless our position was ... that there was nothing we could do. We saw, too, that the ground was literally honeycombed, and we dived down these burrows, out of the reach of the trees.

"There were nineteen of us that escaped. I can't tell you how we lived—I would not if I could. The burrows had been dug by the pig-like animals that the trees live upon, and they led, eventually, to the shore, where there was water—horrible, bitter stuff, but not salty, and apparently not poisonous."

We lived on these pig-like animals, and we learned something of their way of life. The trees seem to sleep, or become inactive, at night. Not unless they are touched do they lash about with their tentacles. At night the animals feed, largely upon the large, soft fruit of these trees. Of course, large numbers of them make a fatal step each night, but they are prolific, and their ranks do not suffer.

"Of course, we tried to get back to the clearing, and the *Dorlos*; first by tunneling. That was impossible, we found, because the rays used by the *Filanus* in clearing a landing place had acted somewhat upon the earth beneath, and it was like powder. Our burrows fell in upon us faster than we could dig them out! Two of my men lost their lives that way.

"Then we tried creeping back by night; but we could not see as can the other animals here, and we quickly found that it was suicide to attempt such tactics. Two more of the men were lost in that fashion. That left fourteen.

"We decided then to wait. We knew there would be another ship along, sooner or later. Luckily, one of the men had somehow retained his menore. We treasured that as we treasured our lives. To-day, when, deep in our runways beneath the surface, we felt, or heard, the crashing of the trees, we knew the Service had not forgotten us. I put on the menore; I—but I think you know the rest, gentlemen. There were eleven of us left. We are here—all that is left of the *Dorlos* crew. We found no trace of any survivor of the *Filanus*; unaware of the possibility of danger, they were undoubtedly, all the victims of ... the trees."

Wilson's head dropped forward on his chest. He straightened up with a start and an apologetic smile.



"I believe, Hanson," he said slowly, "I'd better get ... a little ... rest," and he slumped forward on the table in the death-like sleep of utter exhaustion.

There the interesting part of the story ends. The rest is history, and there is too much dry history in the Universe already.

Dival wrote three great volumes on L-472—or Ibit, as it is called now. One of them tells in detail how the presence of constantly increasing quantities of volcanic ash robbed the soil of that little world of its vitality, so that all forms of vegetation except the one became extinct, and how, through a process of development and evolution, those trees became carnivorous.

The second volume is a learned discussion of the tree itself; it seems that a few specimens were spared for study, isolated on a peninsula of one of the continents, and turned over to Dival for observation and dissection. All I can say for the book is that it is probably accurate. Certainly it is neither interesting nor comprehensible.

And then, of course, there is his treatise on ocrate: how he happened to find the ore, the probable amount available on L-472—or Ibit, if you prefer—and an explanation of his new method of refining it. I saw him frantically gathering specimens while we were getting ready to leave, but it wasn't until after we had departed that he mentioned what he had found.

I have a set of these volumes somewhere; Dival autographed them and presented me with them. They established his position, I understand, in his world of science, and of course, the discovery of this new source of ocrate was a tremendous find for the whole Universe; interplanetary transportation wouldn't be where it is to-day if it were not for this inexhaustible source of power.

Yes, Dival became famous—and very rich.

I received the handshakes and the gratitude of the eleven men we rescued, and exactly nine words of commendation from the Chief of my squadron: *"You are a credit to the Service, Commander Hanson!"*

Perhaps, to some who read this, it will seem that Dival fared better than I. But to men who have known the comradeship of the outer space, the heart-felt gratitude of eleven friends is a precious thing. And to any man who has ever worn the blue and silver uniform of the Special Patrol Service, those nine words from the Chief of Squadron will sound strong.

Chiefs of Squadrons in the Special Patrol Service—at least in those days—were scanty with praise. It may be different in these days of soft living and political pull.